

# WHY SO MANY CHANGES IN THE IMMUNIZATION SCHEDULE?

"You Gave Them Life. Protect It." is one theme of the 1999 National Infant Immunization Week, April 16-22. Parents with new infants are faced with many responsibilities—one of which is to ensure that their children are protected from vaccine-preventable diseases. By age 2, children need to complete a series of seven immunizations, which can be given at five visits to a health care provider. These immunizations can protect children from 11 vaccine-preventable diseases. But the number of doses and injections needed to complete the vaccination schedule can confuse many parents.

NATIONAL  
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To further complicate the issue, changes in the recommended vaccination schedule continue to be made. These changes may cause some parents and caregivers to question why their infant needs new vaccines since their older children did not receive them during infancy. The facts about vaccines and recommendations for childhood immunizations should be discussed and understood by parents/caregivers and health care providers.

Many changes in the immunization schedule are made because of the introduction of new vaccines and improvements made to vaccines to make them safer and easier to use.

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One recent change is in the polio schedule. The first two doses are inactivated polio vaccine (IPV) followed by two doses of oral polio vaccine (OPV), except in special circumstances. This change was made to reduce the risk of vaccine-associated paralytic polio.

Still other changes are made to simplify immunization recommendations while enhancing the protection offered by a vaccine. For example, one relatively new vaccine combines *H. influenzae* type b (Hib) and hepatitis B. Making new and improved vaccines available may mean adding them to the schedule but not necessarily adding another visit to the provider. Combination vaccines may actually reduce the number of shots needed.

All changes in the immunization schedule result from scientific reviews of information on vaccine safety and efficacy by scientists and other professionals concerned with child health and disease prevention. The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) meets several times each year to consider new information on vaccines and immunization practices. These reviews determine whether new recommendations are made, some of which may result in a change in the immunization schedule. The recommended schedule is updated and published every 6 to 12 months by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The ACIP, together with the Committee on Infectious Diseases of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), helped develop a "harmonized" schedule. This schedule, which is distributed by the CDC, gives providers flexibility to schedule immunizations in conjunction with routine visits for infant care. For parents and care givers, this means fewer visits to obtain preventive care for their infants.

National Infant Immunization Week is a good time to remind parents to ask their health care provider about their children's immunizations. The message "You Gave Them Life. Protect It." is a reminder that can help ensure that children receive all the new, improved vaccines that can prevent 10 vaccine-preventable diseases—and in the appropriate schedule.